

# frieze<sup>d/e</sup>

## Me, Myself & I

THINKPIECE

Self-presentation in recent art and writing



Peter Wächtler, *Untitled*, 2014, plaster, shellac and wax  
(courtesy: the artist & Reena Spaulings Fine Art, New York; photograph: Jörg Lohse)

The 'self' seems to have returned with dramatic fervour of late. Amid the technological paradigm of the selfie, we have seen the mainstream proliferation of 'reality' and auto-fiction by the likes of Elena Ferrante, Karl Ove Knausgård and Ben Lerner. Within contemporary art artists' biographical and aesthetic personae continue to be fused, while the human

body has rematerialized within figurative painting, photography and mannequin-like sculpture. Just who are these selves? They seem vague, fractious and powerful spectres, yet also often conspicuously ineffectual ones. Strangely, the self, as a shifting index determined by its particular speaker, is a notion that shirks cohesive categorization: to describe 'your' self is ontologically and epistemologically distinct from describing 'mine', and it's contradictory to speak of a self in general or a 'collective' self. This has always been the productive condition of self-portraiture in art, as well as acts of religious or criminal confession: I cannot confess for another. And to betray myself – in the dual sense 'divulge' and 'deceive' – points to the two, related implications of speaking the self: subservience to and autonomy from those same forces that enable me to say 'me'.

Since the reflective sweep of St. Augustine's *Confessions* (written between 397–400 CE), selfhood has been determined by the ritual, religious or symbolic performance of interiority. With Michel de Montaigne's personal and digressive *Essais* (1580), the detailed courtly memoirs of Louis de Rouvroy 'duc de Saint-Simon' in the 18th century, and onward past Marcel Proust, some attempt has been made to articulate, consolidate or draw out that interiority along the matrix of observed external detail. So it's warranted to ask what remains of selfhood after such interiority has become spectacle, as well as what shapes such interiority can now take. A work's thematization of its maker might likely signify that maker's absence – an attempt, then, to concretize, hallucinate or pin down what is missing. One might be reminded of the sheer number of times selfhood has been killed off in the 20th century – by formalist and modernist aesthetic doctrines (for T.S. Eliot, art was 'an escape from personality'<sup>1</sup>), later by the critical deconstructions of theory, and finally by the neoliberal practices that have turned the self into productive capital. If the 'self', holding little implicit contiguity, has long been philosophically and economically interrogated, then we ought to inquire instead as to the stylistic and rhetorical effects we associate with the recent assertion of 'selfhood' in art: the tonal markers of confessionality, expressivity, emotion, personality, and the externalization of affect, memory and inner experience. Some traits come to mind: these determinations are deliberate (and not coerced); their 'reality' is enhanced (and even constituted by) by an element of panache, flair or exaggeration and they thus contain an element of illusion; and, as a result, these confessional acts are implicated in today's loaded dialectics of secrecy and exposure. In the 1970s and '80s, Michel Foucault argued that the techniques of 'confession' that have, since the Middle Ages, historically served to determine both truth and selfhood, serve to further subjugate the subject rather than 'free' it as the act would promise<sup>2</sup>: 'We have singularly become a confessing society', wrote Foucault, with 'the infinite task of

extracting from the depths of oneself a truth which the very form of the confession holds out like a shimmering mirage.’<sup>3</sup> Perhaps, then, why these ‘selves’, impaired and fragile, seem so forcefully shared of late is because they have been so markedly absent elsewhere, eroded anew by the cold bargaining forces of a ‘sharing’ economy that have reciprocally constructed them – this time as mirage.

‘It was on an Air Malaysia flight that I once chanced to sit beside Verena Dengler,’ writes Verena Dengler in a sardonic story-essay accompanying her exhibition *Dengled Up In Blue* (2015) at Galerie Meyer Kainer, Vienna. The show included a series of pencil-drawn meta-self-portraits: portraits of Dengler, by Dengler, copied from pre-existing portraits of her made by ‘artist-friends’ (Will Benedict, John Kelsey, Lucy McKenzie, Josephine Pryde and Tanja Widmann) in which she went unnamed. Dengler’s double re-presentation was meant antagonistically: in protest at the cult of collaboration that nominally circumvents named ownership via fungible, though perhaps exploitative, modes of anonymous authorship. These modes adhere to a ‘death of the author’ principle (one thinks of the performed authorlessness of the novel *Reena Spaulings* (2004)) which makes the forceless body of the maker entirely susceptible to potencies outside of him or her. As Dengler writes: ‘what’s barbaric about the art business: the platforms – a text, for example – that abuse their publicity for purely private purposes.’ Instead, a key facet of Dengler’s work here – like, say, the *DOCUMENTA* (12)-set novel by Enrique Vila-Matas, *Kassel no invita a la lógica* (2014), where curator and writer Chus Martínez is a main character – is its recourse to proper names. Dengler quotes theorist Byung-Chul-Han: ‘Respect is attached to a name. Anonymity and respect are mutually exclusive. The anonymous communication encouraged by the digital medium effects a massive erosion of respect.’ What Dengler has in mind is also the reciprocal notion: the use of private material for public purposes – the staging of intimate or contentious personal detail amid the public realm, as with the writing of Kraus, whose *I Love Dick* (1997) has proved to be an urtext of this genre of public-private, asserted passivity.

Dengler’s portraits stand vehemently against the self-effacing cult of abstracted personality implicit in an art world which is nevertheless self-deceptively driven by artists’ biography; all the while shedding light on self-presentation’s commonality with abjection or humiliation. Commenting upon the diminutive inflection of the word ‘girl’, Dengler links exhibiting ‘signs of tenderness’ to ‘symbolic gang rape’ by a public, a ‘phenomenon ... of showing inordinate acquiescence in order to avoid being subject [to] even more aggression.’ Dengler seems to have in mind the (often online) presentation of a highly sexualized and gendered persona

which functions as a kind of vaccine – self-abjection to ward off further pain. That there is a gender component to this complex comes as no surprise, when one considers the paradox of disclosure Roland Barthes exposed: the strip teaser is desexualized the moment she is nude. Dengler's key word here is 'use': presenting 'tender' selfhood is to use it to assume a position of power – I own my image. But as tender, it is also weak: I am an only an image.



Verena Dengler *After a portrait of Verena Dengler by Josephine Pryde (VD 1, 2001)*  
coloured pencil on paper, 2013  
(courtesy: the artist & Galerie Meyer Kainer, Vienna)

The word ‘tenderness’ highlights the contradiction of self-presentation, and the latent fierceness of ‘soft’-seeming sentimentality. In literary terms, self-abasement as self-assertion is characteristic of the confessional mode: the narrator’s humiliation or abjection before the (implicated) reader-public. Before we talk, then, of self-presentation – as if the self were merely squeezing out, in carnivalesque fashion, its ectoplasm before an admiring or horrified public – it’s worth acknowledging that in nearly every such recent case in art and writing, the recourse to selfhood is predicated by a sense of failure with regard to parallel activities, a failure re-performed for a foregrounded public. Writing the self, in the context of visual art, might be seen itself as a kind of ‘failure’, which seems to account for the recent proliferation of white, male, overly demure self-portraiture in writing (inverting the *écriture féminine* of Julia Kristeva, Kathy Acker and Kraus). The contra-diction is as follows: I pronounce my own failure, that is, myself (my art); insofar as my pronouncement succeeds (as art), I both contradict this failure and retain the truth-value of my initial announcement (as failure).

Such ‘failure’ takes various forms: the failure of the ‘real’ as an inquiry into self-reflexivity and questions of authorship in Helmut Draxler’s Tristram Shandy-themed exhibition *Shandyism: Authorship as Genre* at Secession, Vienna (2006), for which artists made works responding to Laurence Sterne’s ‘self-aware’ 1759 novel; or the failure of career artistry, when David Lieske presented his autobiographical *Kunstlerroman* – a gossipy, provocative catalogue of failed careers with the double-entendre title *I Tried To Make This Work* – to be read only on site at mumok, Vienna (2015); and in the willfully ‘exposed’ photographic self-portraiture of Amalia Ulman or Talia Chetrit. Iconic as narratives of poetic failure are the meandering stories of Josef Strau, which bear a prismatic fragility through their sensitive staging of an erratic, personal alienation: the ‘narcistic [sic] cultivation and meaninglessness’ of an ‘errand boy of melancholy’. Strau’s seminal text on being a non-artist in the ’90s Cologne scene, *The Non-Productive Attitude* (2006) is, after all, about the failure to produce anything at all – and the sense of empowerment that comes from doing nothing. In this lineage, the recent, deliberately pathetic writings of artist Peter Wächtler take on a cringy, histrionic intrigue by their staging of personal, sexual humiliation: an emasculating dinner with an ex and her new, hyper-masculine lover (*At the WIELS*, 2012). Even Kraus’ *I Love Dick* is undergirded by the novel’s thematization of the author’s failure as a ‘video artist’. Confession inevitably leads to an overconfession that compromises the very self that ought to be redeemed in the act, all the while implicating named others (and ultimately the reader). Such would seem to be the naturalized condition of production within the art world. As

Wächtler writes in his story *Der Pöbelanwalt* (2014), ‘the others become indiscrete and talk about your habits, your drinking, your love relations, they take everything from you and you give them, naturally, something free of cost, too ... you become a only question of dosage, and suddenly you give the right people the wrong dosage and you’re alone ...’ Here, the fittingness of these confessional modes in our age of TMI becomes clear. A ‘sharing’ economy (‘dosage’) is inherently an ‘oversharing’, overdosing economy: when I share this with you, what’s mine is now yours; reciprocally, what’s mine is no longer mine. My only way ‘out’ is to go deeper ‘in’, to compromise myself still further.

The confessional mode, in writing and art, through its exposed vulnerability, leads quickly to the traits of fragility and emotiveness we associate with sentimentality; still, the nature of that sentimentality is changed, hardened, when given public expression. Ed Atkins’ recent project intended as a decade-long love letter (<http://www.80072745.net>, 2015–ongoing), seemingly to no one in particular, attains pathos in its pointed non-directedness, but it should not be confused with the sentimentality it professes. Something new occurs when honesty, sincerity or sentimentality announce themselves. The truth of the ‘sincere’ utterance fuses with the technique of persuasion required to convince an addressee of that truth. As persuasion, sincerity falters, is no longer ‘sincere’: Amalia Ulman’s reflection in a 2013 interview that ‘I’m too sincere when it comes to sharing my life with people’ has since garnered an unexpected valence: in a radical joining of self-presentation and farce, Ulman’s ‘body modification’, recorded on Instagram, was in fact ‘fake’, an ‘art’ performance (*Excellences and Perfections*, 2014), to the equal derision and admiration of her public. Yet she was being truthful at the end of that same interview: ‘I don’t know how to be honest’.<sup>4</sup>

The classical way of framing this liar’s paradox of honesty and deception is the rhetorical paradigm of irony, Friedrich Schlegel’s ‘alter-nation between self-creation and self-destruction’<sup>5</sup>. Below every ‘mild’, ‘sincere’ self is the ironic subject cognizant of its own hidden failure to live up to its professed transparency and the gap between its interiority with the externality it perceives. This is the dialectic of bartered selfhood so well played out by poet Frank O’Hara. A text or movie, like a person, can assert its power and make us weep; but we can forget it just as easily, like a can of Coke, and repudiate it precisely for the emotional effect it has or once had upon us. Emotions, like leaves, burn quickly and smother the fire; but the extinguishing of that fire can in itself make for good spectacle, or at times, art. Montaigne perhaps still has the last word when it comes to the public writing of selfhood: in *On Vanity* (c.1585), he points out that writing the

self contains an ethical mandate, the self-fulfilling promise to hold ‘myself to the word that makes it: ‘Even in actions wholly my own and free, once I say a thing, I conceive that I have bound myself, and that delivering it to the knowledge of another, I have positively enjoined it my own performance.’ These acts of free profession bind us. The real weight of these ‘personal’ speech acts is not their recourse to an empty, externalized self, nor their breaching of privacy and publicity (both relative terms), but their admission of the normative milieu of self and other – the recalibration of what was once called an ethics. We are, in the end, all implicated.

—by *Pablo Larios*

*Pablo Larios is a writer and assistant editor of frieze d/e.*